

ROBERT BREER INTERVIEWED BY DAVID CURTIS

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To hear Robert Breer being publicly interviewed is to listen to ‘Man and His Thoughts Out for Air’, to adapt the title of one of his best-known films, *Man and His Dog Out For Air*. This was an opportunity for us to hear him stroll through his memory and answer the questions he had wanted to answer, just as much as the questions David actually asked. Breer is now 82, suffering from hearing loss, and although I remembered him from photographs and previous visits to the UK as clean-shaven, he is now the bearded sage of Tappen Zee, New York, where he lives. One thing does remain constant. In recounting his past, he likes to refer to having been the ‘official and unofficial artist (mostly cartoonist)’ in high school where he was ‘voted class wit’. Throughout his career, both in his films and in his personality, he has remained a wit and expresses serious ideas in an amusing way. What is more, he bounces round reality like a ping-pong ball. In the earnest and long-winded world of experimental film, this has been refreshing. So, the interview on stage lasted close on 90 minutes, and we only got to the 1960s, but there was a lot of humour and liveliness along the way. The dreary photograph I include here (I plead poor lighting conditions) does not do justice to the bright atmosphere of the occasion.



This essay is not a transcript of the interview, but is put together from other published material and mostly from the notes I made at the time, a tricky exercise because Breer went back and forth, intercutting ideas, leaving some questions unanswered, and some answers unfinished, yet showing off a highly creative mind at work.

First of all, let us get some biographical detail out of the way. I thought it was worth assembling the following facts from what he said that day and on other occasions:

- Born 1926
- Father was engineer in Detroit car industry (and designer of the Chrysler Airflow automobile in 1934)
- ca 1936, went to art classes at the Detroit Institute of Art
- to Stanford in 1943 to study engineering
- Played high-school football and captained the team in 1943
- First acquaintance with fine art through mother of a friend (what year?)
- Around 1944, he switched at college from engineering to art
- Drafted into US Army from 1945 to 1947
- Returned to Stanford in 1947 and had first exposure to Mondrian on a trip to San Francisco
- Graduated in 1949, spent three years in Paris under the GI Bill (having crossed the Atlantic on a small freighter), and apparently in Paris for most of 1950s
- First film *Form Phases* in 1952
- 43 films between 1952 and 2003.

The facts provide a framework for understanding how Breer became a creative artist. Two strands are apparent from the beginning. The first is the cartooning one. He liked drawing with charcoal early on, a medium which allows rapid execution and the deft sketching necessary for suggesting shapes and movement. Secondly, it seems to me that his father's engineering talent – all articles like to mention his father's work for Chrysler – was important in giving him an inherited talent for studio practice that used mechanical know-how to eliminate as much of the boring part of animation as possible, for example a device to move a drawing into position on the lightbox. It also must have contributed to Breer's interest in machinery in his films, for example the rotating pole in *69*, and more

significantly still in the machinery of optics: experimenting with how we perceive things on screen. His father's hobby was photography and his experimenting bent led him to invent a camera for making 3D movies (to watch them 'you had to sit upright'). This created an interest in the intersection between photography and the physical world.

Something turned Breer on to abstract art in the 1940s, and he often cites the visit to the Mondrian exhibition in San Francisco in the late 40s. Although his art teachers were all figurative, after the Mondrian experience he made an abstract painting -- which was turned against the wall in disapproval. He was rescued by the Head of Humanities who 'set me up in a faculty studio to paint as I wished with a young art faculty teacher to check on me once a week or so' [as he explained to Fred Camper]. Living in Paris, he fell in with Victor Vasarely (pure abstractionist), Hans Arp (explorer of the operation of chance) and Jean Tinguely (who delighted in machinery in motion). In connection with the artists devoted to pure abstraction, he said that they had an 'almost religious devotion to the operation within the frame' adding that avant-gardism was much formalized in Paris, so that every show had to have a manifesto, an idea to which Breer was himself resistant. This is an intriguing contrast between the ideological purity of the Europeans ('they were all Communists') creating only within a theoretical framework, and the practical, pragmatic American.

It is clear that Paris was a good place for Breer to be. Beside the ferment in the gallery world, it provided an opportunity to see work from the film avant-garde as well (which would not necessarily have been true if, say, he had been in London): Ruttmann, Eggeling, Richter, Léger. But he did not lose sight of the comic tradition either: seeing the early animation of Émile Cohl had an impact as well (this was in the late 1950s, after he had made *Man and His Dog Out For Air*), for its whimsy and for its exploitation of the spontaneous transformation that film can achieve, for example of a hat into a bird.

Breer's first film, *Form Phases*, made in 1952, was preceded (if I understood this correctly) by what seems to have been a significant moment, when returning to Michigan from Paris, he nailed a camera (still? movie?) to a door in order to fix it, and took a sequence of images. Also, referring to the time of the Mondrian exhibition and therefore presumably to his own early work as a painter, Breer said he had made sketches of the stages of a painting, put them on cards and then flipped through them. These ideas then

fed into *Form Phases*, which moved abstract shapes around in a frame, and spawned three other works, which now comprise *Form Phases I to IV*. But he seems to have wanted to move forward from this. When David Curtis asked him why he stopped making abstract films and went onto something else, Breer referred to the way he got interested in the act of looking at a painting: do you need just to glance at it or absorb it through a stare? This could be widened into how we perceive events: do they happen consecutively, or in fact do they happen simultaneously? Surrealism, which seeks to create a different kind of narrative through incongruity, to reveal a hidden narrative, was not of interest, as he 'had got into painting as a discipline to avoid narrative'. What he wanted was to apply plastic ideas solely, i.e. the fact that one image could be interrupted by another, or as Marshall McLuhan characterized it, the fact that perception could be simultaneous rather than linear. When David asked whether he was interested in the idea of a 'stream of consciousness', or using free association, Breer was prepared to admit that possibly this was right, but that the important thing was to get away from narrative continuity, to sequence images 'against narrative in order to preserve plastic qualities'.

For their time, these ideas were very new. Breer referred to his 'first stumbling effects' (presumably *Form Phases I-IV* and *Image by Images I-IV*), before he made a film 'that really excited me'. This was *Recreation* (1956), only two minutes long, but in effect a 'collage' of hundreds of different images. (As he told Jim Trainor, 'I wanted something that would stroke the retina a little more.') A follow-up film (presumably *Recreation II*) he felt was dead, and linked that with a comment on his aim to be unpredictable throughout his career. In 1957, *Man and His Dog Out For Air* showed Breer in much more linear form, albeit in a very free way, which he described as an antidote to his more 'congested' films. But having made *Recreation*, he did return to those ideas in 1961 in the film *Blazes*. This film takes 100 different images painted in gouache on individual cards which were then scattered on the floor. When they were gathered into a pack, Breer found he could flip through them, see how they reacted to one another, and amend the order. In talking of this process, he referred to the precedence of the Dadaist, Hans Arp, who dropped pieces of paper on the floor and then fixed the collage according to how they fell. 'I was repeating Arp.' This linked to a broader point about his inspiration: the

application of chance operations where you did not know the outcome was very important to him.

If there is a unique fact about Breer's technique it is surely being the first to use blank index cards, a 'very practical' solution to how to produce his kind of animation. While *Man and His Dog* was done on typewriter sheets with holes punched so that each sheet fitted on a peg, this was comparatively laborious. Index cards he realized were stiff enough both to fit an exact position on the light box, and to be flipped through by hand in order to test sequences. When you are doing 'animation by oneself, you need to simplify'. These practices seem to have remained crucial throughout his career. Referring to *Gulls and Buoys* (1972), he said he was exploring how rapid changes of colour led to new combinations, and importantly, he 'changed the dosage of colour' by filming each image in two frames rather than just one. So, two frames of red followed by two of green created a 'schizophrenia in the retina', an effect unique to cinema. I asked whether he regretted not having the personal computer available to him which would have been well suited to the ideas he was exploring in the 50s and 60s, to which he gave the robust answer that life was too short for regrets of that kind.

The final strand to be mentioned in the work of this period is that Breer rose to prominence as part of the American film avant-garde, although his friends such as Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein were mostly in the art world. In recalling his efforts to make a bridge between his film work and the gallery world (where the rewards for success were significant), Breer gave vent – without bitterness that I could detect – to a certain frustration and recalled how Hilton Kramer, the noted art critic, refused to write about his films because they moved, while the film critics who wrote about narrative cinema would not write about his films, because 'they could not write about painting'.

Breer's forty-three films have been made over a fifty-year period. This is a very substantial body of work, not in terms of screen time, but because so many things are crammed into the films: like looking down a microscope. Breer commented that there are not more because there was a risk of losing enthusiasm for the creative act. One particular pleasure of seeing the films and hearing him talk was to realize that the enthusiasm was still intact.

Sources

- List of films on www.imdb.com
- ‘Aurora 2007: Possible Worlds’ – catalogue to accompany Aurora Film Festival in Norwich, November 2007, edited by Adam Pugh. See www.aurora.org.uk, where this can be purchased online. Includes an article by Fred Camper and an interview with Robert Breer from 1980 by Jim Trainor.
- Online article by Jackie Leger ‘Robert Breer: Animator’ – go to www.awn.com (and go to: /mag/issue1.4/articles/breer1.4.html).